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ABSTRACT

U.S. schools must today address problems of crime, violence, drugs, suicide, child abuse, and lack of discipline. Academic issues have recently been in the public spotlight, but the quality of a child's education can be severely affected if the child is not in a safe environment. Crime and violence are a pervasive problem in schools, affecting both teachers and students. Recent surveys have shown discipline to be a major problem in the schools. Poor discipline can result from weak discipline policies. The high national dropout rate of 26% indicates that a large proportion of the adult population will face unemployment, menial jobs, and public assistance. Truancy may be related to daytime delinquency. Children's rights to a safe school environment are being recognized through court decisions and legislation. Drug and alcohol abuse are serious problems for schools, and suicide, child abuse, and child neglect all affect schools. School and law enforcement leaders across the nation must focus attention on providing safer schools. (ABL)

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SAFE SCHOOLS OVERVIEW

NSSC RESOURCE PAPER

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SAFE SCHOOLS OVERVIEW

Problems of crime, violence and drugs are extending off our streets and into our schools at an alarming rate. Not only must America's educational institutions address these serious concerns, but they are also being forced to deal with suicide, child abuse and lack of discipline.

The days when student-related school problems consisted mostly of a few playground squabbles and some kids playing hooky are long gone. School attendance and student discipline continue to be major concerns but they are now only part of a long list of issues that must be addressed to assure safe and effective schools for the nation's elementary and secondary school students. This vital part of our population is expected to grow from 44.6 million to nearly 48 million by 1993.

Education is a major part of our lives and it affects the entire country. More than $163 billion of our tax dollars was spent on public education during the 1983-84 school year. The amount spent per student averaged $2,948 in 1982-83, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

State by state expenditures ranged from $1,849 per student in Mississippi to $7,325 per student in Alaska. Other figures from the U.S. Department of Commerce show that individual states spent from about 20 percent to 42 percent of their budgets on education in 1982-83. Some states now spend in excess of half their budgets on education at all levels.

More than 2.4 million teachers are employed to teach the 44.6 million elementary and secondary students in the nation's public and private schools.

In recent years, America's education system has been in the public spotlight as the result of various critical reports. Although purely academic issues are largely the focus of such reports, it is important to note the quality of a child's education can be severely affected if the child is not in a safe and welcoming learning environment.

Research indicates that schools with positive climates usually demonstrate continuous academic and social growth, trust, respect, high morale, change and improvement.

CRIME AND VIOLENCE

Maintaining a safe and positive environment is often a difficult task, especially when considering the following findings of a 1978 study of school crime and violence by the National Institute of Education:

* Approximately 282,000 students are physically attacked in America's secondary schools each month.

* Almost eight percent of urban junior and senior high school students missed at least one day of school a month because they were afraid to go to school.

* Approximately 5,200 of the nation's 1 million secondary school teachers are physically attacked at school in a month's time.

* Estimates of the annual cost of school crime, including vandalism, run from about $50 million to $600 million, with most estimates clustering in the $100-$200 million range. The best estimate of the yearly replacement and repair costs due to crime is about $200 million.

DISCIPLINE

The American public has long regarded discipline as the most important problem facing schools. And 1985 was no different according to the most recent Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward public schools. In fact, 16 of the past 17 annual Gallup surveys demonstrate the undeviating nature of public concern.

This should come as no surprise since discipline problems can range from class-cutting and verbal abuse of teachers, to attacks on students, drug dealing and robberies.

Concern over the discipline problem is shown in various polls and surveys:

* About 16 percent of U.S. teachers say that discipline is " a very serious problem in the schools," according to the 1985 Gallup Poll of teacher's attitudes toward public schools.

* Of students polled nationwide, 14 percent rated improving discipline as the "single most important action my school could take to improve my education," according to a 1984 survey by U.S. News & World Report

* A 1985 survey conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals shows that 16 percent of high school principals rate discipline as the number one problem.

The NIE's 1978 study of crime and violence found that a systemwide disciplinary policy appears to reduce the incidence of crime, while higher crime rates are found in schools where students feel that discipline is unfairly administered -- such schools are usually characterized by weak disciplinary policies, according to the study.

"Poor discipline policies can breed unsafe schools," says Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers. "Safe schools require the development and enforcement of uniform discipline codes."

Mary Hatwood Futrell, President of the National Education Association, notes that the "discipline problem" does not stand in isolation from instructional issues. "It's the total school environment that determines the level of civility in the classroom," says Futrell.

HIGH DROPOUT RATES

The dropout problem in America's schools is also serious cause for concern for the entire nation since the country's economic health is very likely affected by the large number of uneducated and under-educated youths who grow up to comprise a large part of our adult population.

The dropout rate is 26 percent nationally, which means that at least one out of every four students entering high school will not graduate.

Compared to the general public, dropouts are more likely to face unemployment, menial jobs and reliance on public assistance. Consider the following:

* The unemployment rate for dropouts was 23.7 percent compared with 13.8 percent for high school graduates, according to a 1978 report from the U.S. Department of Labor.

* Almost a third of California families receiving Aid for Dependent Children have a head of household who did not complete high school.

The importance of addressing the dropout problem is clearly illustrated in the words of U.S. Senator Arlen Spector (R-Pennsylvania). "Job prospects for dropouts are worse than bleak," according to Spector. "Dropouts who are fortunate find their way into dead-end jobs. The unfortunate ones find their way into prison."

TRUANCY AND DAYTIME BURGLARY

On any given school day, some 2.5 million of the nation's students are absent from classes, according to a 1976 National PTA study.

Although there are no figures on how many are absent due to illness or other legitimate reasons, there is no doubt that many of the absent students are truant.

Several short-term studies in various communities throughout the nation indicate a link between truancy and daytime delinquency and suggest that eliminating truancy may be an answer to decreasing community crime.

In 1978, the Department of Public Safety in Rohnert Park, California instituted a program to reduce truancy and juvenile

crime in the community. During the program's first year in operation, daylight burglaries in Rohnert Park decreased 48 percent.

SCHOOL SAFETY LAW

We are living in a time when the law has become the vehicle for attempting to settle countless conflicts formerly resolved by other means, or merely left unresolved. It is not surprising, therefore, that education law has become increasingly important in our society.

Prior to 1900, the U.S. Supreme Court dealt with only nine educational cases but during the 20th century the Court decided more than 50 cases, including the famous 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education which declared segregated public education was inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional.

It has been necessary for the legal arm of the courtroom to extend into the classroom to ensure due process and other constitutional protections for students.

The U.S. Supreme Court has decided several significant cases directly affecting campus climates. Most recently, in T.L.O. v. New Jersey in 1985, the Court ruled on the propriety of student searches. In 1986, the Court will be dealing with the nature and extent of disciplinary duties and First Amendment rights in schools. (See Bethel School District v. Fraser.)

California voters have recognized the "Right to Safe Schools" with the 1982 passage of "The Victims' Bill of Rights" which includes the provision that: "All students and staff of primary, elementary, junior high and senior high schools have the inalienable right to attend campuses which are safe, secure and peaceful."

It is important that educators throughout the nation be aware there is always the potential for litigation as a result of their actions, inactions and policies. U.S. Chief Justice Warren Burger underscored this issue in January 1986 when he declared, "The serious challenge of restoring a safe school environment has begun to reshape the law." Thus, while the possibility of litigation should not prevent educators from doing their jobs, it should be considered so that the reasons and background for each decision can be articulated and supported.

DRUG/ALCOHOL TRAFFICKING AND ABUSE

Drug traffic and abuse are serious concerns for educators. In fact, the American public considers the use of drugs one of the biggest problems facing public schools today, according to a 1985 Gallup Poll.

Although discipline was regarded as the number one problem facing schools, the next most frequently mentioned problem was drug use, a discipline-related area mentioned by 18 percent of the public.

Nearly two-thirds of America's teenagers have used drugs at least once before they finish high school and 40 percent have used drugs other than marijuana, according to surveys by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Alcohol abuse also continues to be a problem. By the time they are seniors, 9 out of 10 students have experienced alcohol.

Teenagers themselves say drug abuse is the biggest problem they face, with alcohol abuse ranking second and unemployment coming in third as the leading causes of concern, according to the 1984 Gallup Youth Survey.

Concern about drugs has risen from 27 percent in 1977, when teenagers also named it as the number one problem facing their generation, to 40 percent today.

A 1985 survey of high school seniors by University of Michigan researchers showed that a five-year decline in drug and alcohol use appears to be coming to an end. The findings indicate that the improvement of recent years cannot be taken for granted.

While the use of some drugs is neither getting better nor worse, the use of cocaine increased with 17.3 percent of seniors reporting they used it at least once, according to the study by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research.

Although not illegal, tobacco is a drug and is used frequently by teenagers. "In the long run, smoking cigarettes will probably cut short the lives of more of this group of young Americans than will the use of all th other drugs combined," says Dr. Lloyd Johnston, director of the Michigan study, which is funded the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

One in five high school seniors currently is a daily smoker, according to the study, with more than half of these smokers going through at least half a pack of cigarettes daily.

A recent report found that more people worldwide will die as a result of diseases related to smoking and smokeless tobacco than any other preventable cause of death, including war and famine.

CHILD SAFETY

The wide array of problems that school officials deal with also include suicide and child abuse. These are social and emotional issues that deeply affect our children. The following facts indicate the serious need for action to deal with these problems:

* Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year olds.

* It is estimated that more than 6,000 people between the ages of 15 and 24 killed themselves in 1983.

* In 1984 there were 1,712,641 children reported as abused and neglected, according to the American Humane Association. This figure includes an estimated 100,00 children who suffered some form of sexual abuse.

The suicide rate for the 15-24 age group has tripled since 1950. While no single reason can be found for this alarming increase in the loss of America's youth, various studies have suggested that the demands and pressures of today's society have pushed some students over the edge.

Besides depression and lack of achievement, drug and alcohol use is also seen as a factor in suicides.

Teens who commit suicide today are 10 times more likely to be drunk or high on drugs than their counterparts 20 years ago, according to a recent report presented to the American Academy of Child Psychiatry.

Satanic-influenced heavy metal rock songs are also being pointed to as contributing to the rising rate of suicide.

It is vital that educators and law enforcers address the problems of troubled and endangered children.

SCHOOL SAFETY PARTNERSHIPS

While many school officials are making concerted efforts to address some or all of these problems, it is important to recognize that issues of this magnitude and complexity require community solutions--especially since problems on school campuses reflect problems in the community.

Numerous resources are available to aid in addressing these problems. However, intensive interagency communication and cooperation are necessary to make those resources work.

School and law enforcement leaders across the nation must actively focus joint attention on providing safer schools with increased attendance and improved discipline, as well as environments that are free of drugs and alcohol.

The National School Safety Center brings together public, private and academic resources throughout America to provide a central headquarters to assist educators, law enforcers, lawyers government officials and the public to ensure all our schools are safe, secure and tranquil places of learning.